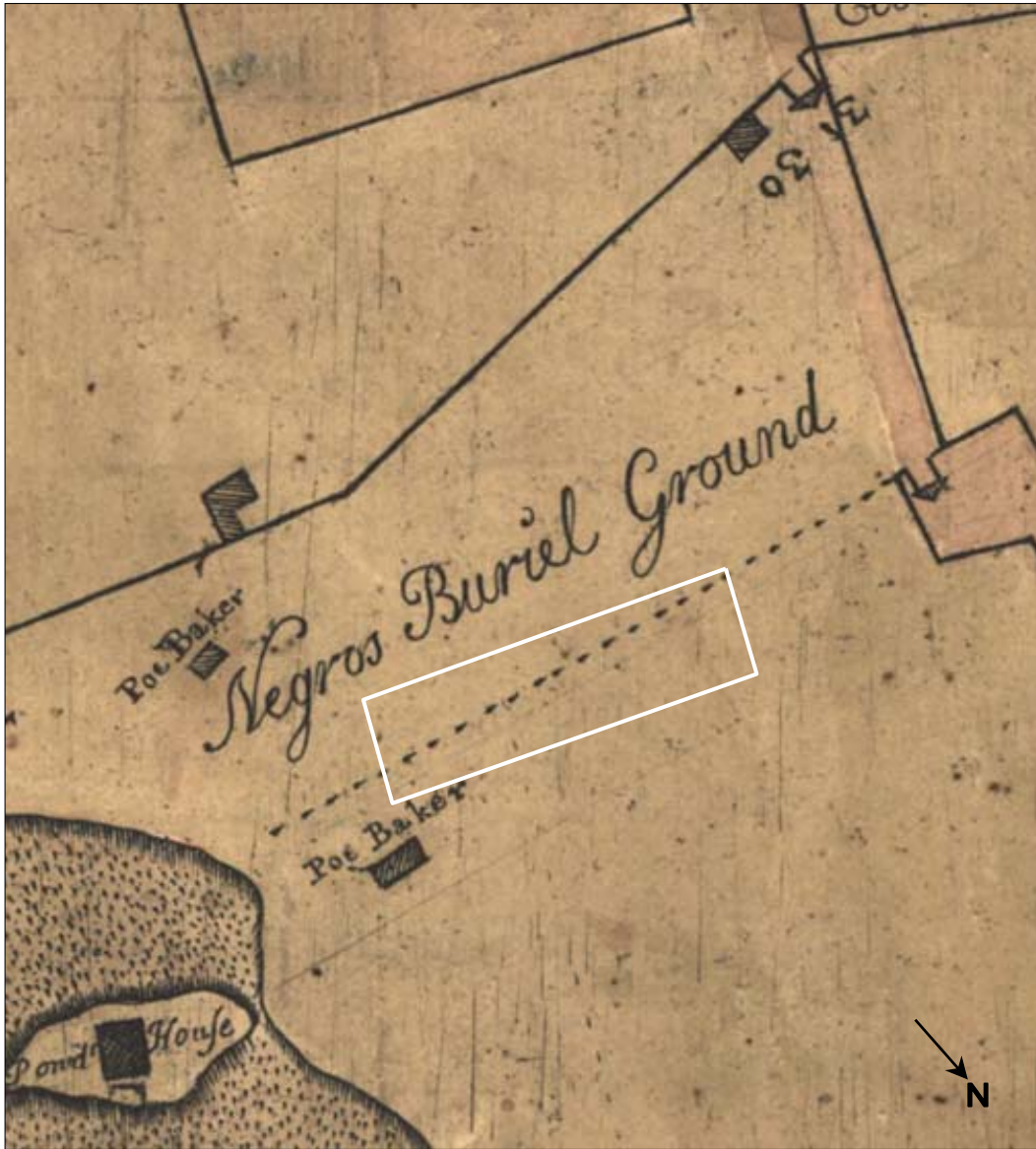


**NEW YORK AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND
ARCHAEOLOGY FINAL REPORT
VOLUME 1**

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PREPARED BY HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

**FOR THE UNITED STATES GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NORTHEASTERN AND CARIBBEAN REGION**

FEBRUARY 2006

***Howard University's New York African Burial Ground Project
was funded by the U.S. General Services Administration Under
Contract No. GS-02P-93-CUC-0071***



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*Cover art: Detail of Maerschalk Plan (Francis Maerschalk, 1754) with an overlay showing the location of
the archaeologically excavated portion of the African Burial Ground. Library of Congress.*

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PROLOGUE

In 1992 I received a phone call from my friend and colleague, Dr. Michael Blakey, who at the time was on the faculty at Howard University. He was calling to ask me to head up the archaeological component of the African Burial Ground Project. I had mixed emotions: I was flattered and excited but also found the challenge frightening. Would I be able to handle the responsibility for a site important to my discipline of anthropology but also to the African-American community of New York, my city, the city in which I was reared?

I came to archaeology later in life than many of my contemporaries, starting graduate work at City University of New York in the late 1970s. Some of my earliest experiences in the field were at sites associated with 19th-century African-American communities, including Brooklyn's Weeksville (investigated by Burt Salwen) and the oystering community at Sandy Ground, Staten Island (investigated by Robert Schuyler). These projects helped turn attention within archaeology to the presence of African Americans in New York. As my training continued, it became clear to me that to obtain a greater understanding of Africans in New York and in the Diaspora in general, it would be advantageous to conduct archaeological research in Africa.

While teaching as an adjunct in the Anthropology Department at City College, I had the good fortune of befriending Mpiwa Mbatha, a Zulu who taught sociocultural anthropology. He sparked my interest in the emergence of the Zulu kingdom in the 19th century, and with help from him and others I was able to spend nine months in Swaziland conducting regional survey. My research was part of a general critique of then-current theories of the rise of the Zulu kingdom, and the settlement data contributed to a revised picture of social upheaval. In the newer thinking, the Zulu kingdom was part of a series of responses to havoc in the interior of southern Africa caused by late 18th century European penetration spearheaded by an illegal trade in captive Africans. My research allowed me to integrate issues of settlement analysis, the political economy of racism, and forms of domination and resistance, all being discussed by historical archaeologists at that time.

Dr. Blakey's invitation would allow me to continue investigating the hidden and marginalized histories of the African Diaspora, participate in an increasingly important sub-field within American archaeology, bring the themes of domination and resistance to a new set of data, and to work with my people. It was also a time, the 1990s, when archaeologists in North America increasingly worked closely with descendant communities, in part because of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. I knew that the African American community of New York City had been instrumental in shaping the project's direction. And I knew, in ways that I suspected others did not know, about the complexity of this community and about the damage caused from having our history hidden from us.

Growing up in the South Bronx, I was taught in elementary school during the late 1940s and early 1950s that I was fortunate to live in New York City and not in the south, because black folks were enslaved in the south but were “free” in the north. This “fortune” was belied when I looked around the school and saw no teachers or administrators, let alone principals, who were people of color. The only people of color were black women working in the lunchroom and one black man who was a maintenance worker. Almost all of the students were of African descent, and a few were Puerto Rican. I never knew if we were supposed to be oblivious to this disjuncture, or to accept secondary status and be thankful that we lived in the north.

Our received vision of Africa was no different. I remember being shown a cartoon of loincloth-clad African men with bones in their noses and negatively exaggerated lips and eyes, holding spears and dancing around two white men with pith helmets in a pot of boiling water. The message was clear: I was fortunate to have been descended from Africans who were brought to New York and “saved” by Lincoln, rather than left in the “jungles” of Africa with those cannibalistic “savages,” my ancestors. It was painful to be black in New York City and subjected to an educational system that taught us that Africans had no history until Europeans rescued us from ourselves.

On the other hand, I had parents and grandparents who instilled black pride in my brother and me, and demonstrated to us that we *did* have a history beyond, and in spite of, captivity in the United States. They taught us about our own family, in particular my great-grandfather, Christopher J. Perry I, who in 1884 founded Philadelphia’s first black newspaper, the Philadelphia Tribune. They introduced us to the achievements of W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Marion Anderson, Sojourner Truth and other black leaders who were not part of the New York City school curriculum.

I received another lesson in African Diaspora history in 1963, when I heard Malcolm X speak about the link between Africa and African-Americans at a Black Muslim rally on 125th Street (or 25th Street, as it was known to young, streetwise black youth). During his speech a listener taunted him: “I ain’t left nothing in Africa!” Malcolm replied, “You left your mind in Africa.” I understood Malcolm’s reply to mean that Europeans had attempted, through coercion and control, to remove African Diaspora peoples from their African heritage, history, and identity. Since that time, I have drawn strength from the memory of Malcolm’s passion and commitment as I delved into the relationship between Africa and the African Diaspora. I resolved to learn the truth about African people in Africa and the Diaspora and to challenge the Euro-centric conceptions of who we were and what our history had been.

In 1991, I was a doctoral candidate at the City University of New York’s Graduate Anthropology Program, specializing in archaeology. At that time there were only three postdoctoral-level archaeologists of color in the United States (Warren Barber, Theresa Singleton and Laura Henley Dean). Late one night I was awakened by a knock at the door of my South Bronx apartment. Errol Maitland, my friend and former City College student, and an acquaintance from the Patrice Lumumba Coalition, had come to discuss the newly rediscovered African Burial Ground. They urged me, as a black archaeologist, to become involved in the project. I was deeply immersed in my doctoral dissertation

and despite my commitment to the principles embodied in the project, I could not dedicate the time and effort it would require. I recommended that they contact Dr. Blakey. When I received Blakey's phone call in 1992, however, I committed to joining the project as soon as I had completed my Ph.D. In 1993, Howard University took control of the project, and in 1994 I became the Associate Director for Archaeology.

I knew that I could not accomplish such a daunting and important task without capable, dedicated colleagues. Early in my association with the project, I attended an interfaith service at the African Burial Ground site. I stood on the sacred ground that held my ancestors, and asked them for help and guidance in retelling the lost histories of their

lives. I soon received a response as, one by one, the colleagues I asked to join the team accepted what I see as a calling from the ancestors.



Egunfemi Adegbolola, Chief Alagba of New York, commemorating the ancestors in a Yoruba ceremony at the African Burial Ground. Photograph by Dennis Seckler.

I feel proud and privileged to have been asked to be a part of a multidisciplinary research undertaking aimed at telling the world the story of the ancestors. I am committed to the African Burial Ground Project both as a member of the descendant community and as a member of the academic community, and there are very few people in that zone of overlap. I stood and still stand with my feet in each world: this project, with all its stresses rewards, has allowed me to be whole.

The significance of the African Burial Ground extends beyond its importance to the African-American community. The history of this cemetery and of those buried here speaks to the complex history of the United States, with all its diverse populations, and to an even larger, world history. Understanding is diminished when African people, women, and subaltern or working class communities are marginalized; their omission from our collective historical consciousness has negative implications for all.

Warren R. Perry
New Britain, Connecticut
February 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Howard University Archaeology Team is grateful to the community members and the church, civic, and cultural organizations that paid close attention to the African Burial Ground Project over the years. Their support made this work possible, and their questions helped us to sharpen our inquiry.

We gratefully acknowledge Dr. O. Jackson Cole (Office of the President) and Dr. James A Donaldson (Dean, College of Arts and Sciences) for their efforts in the administration of the project. Also at Howard, Ms. Reba Brewington, Office Manager for the Cobb Laboratory, and Ms. Alma Kemp, Administrative Assistant in the Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, patiently fielded our questions, facilitated the sharing of information, and routed paperwork and files; Ms. Lori Sweet, Administrative Assistant, Office of the President, helped ensure that the transmission of the draft and final reports went smoothly.

We thank Contracting Officer Mildred Broughton and others on the New York staff of the U.S. General Services Administration for providing laboratory and office facilities, initially at the World Trade Center and later at 1 Bowling Green, and for their efforts in salvaging the laboratory after September 11, 2001. Nancy Brighton of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, on behalf of the Contracting Officer's Technical Representative, acted as liaison between the research team, GSA, and advisory agencies, oversaw the transfer of the collections for reburial, and provided helpful comments on the draft report. The staffs of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation provided consultation to the GSA and commented on the draft report.

The archaeology team owes an enormous debt to the African Burial Ground Project's Scientific Director, Dr. Michael L. Blakey. His knowledge, leadership, generosity, encouragement, and resolve have been a mainstay over the years. We are profoundly grateful to all of the researchers from the Skeletal Biology Team (led by Blakey and Dr. Leslie M. Rankin-Hill) and the History Team (led by Dr. Edna Greene Medford), who helped shape our findings while sharing theirs as the project proceeded.

Dr. Blakey helped us to clarify and share the archaeological findings by organizing a series of multidisciplinary Sankofa Conferences, sponsored by Howard University and the College of William and Mary, that brought together the project's geographically dispersed research teams and other scholars of Africa and the African Diaspora. We wish to thank all of the participants, particularly Selwyn H.H. Carrington, Alan Goodman, Fatimah Jackson, Mark Mack, Edna Greene Medford, and Leslie Rankin-Hill. Kofi Agorsah, Augustin Holl, Bob Paynter, and Chris DeCorse helped formulate and refine archaeological issues. Chris Moore, Grey Gundaker, and T. J. Davis, among others, shared their insights on historical questions raised by the archaeological findings.

We thank the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William and Mary for providing a second institutional home for the project. We especially appreciate Shannon Mahoney and Autumn Barrett for their research assistance, for answering our last-minute questions about the skeletal data, and for their superb efforts in facilitating the Sankofa Conferences.

Dr. Sherrill Wilson, Director of the New York African Burial Ground Project's Office of Public Education and Interpretation, shared her considerable knowledge of New York's African American history, helped broaden the research by pointing out important sources, opened her library to us, provided the roster on escapee advertisements, read early drafts of the report, and ensured that our findings were brought to thousands of schoolchildren and the wider public.

Meta Janowitz shared her knowledge of Dutch New York and of the 18th-century stoneware that was so ubiquitous at the African Burial Ground site, discussed archaeological issues, read early drafts of several chapters, and generally provided good cheer in the New York laboratory.

The archaeological investigation was begun by the late Edward S. Rutsch of Historic Conservation and Interpretation, and we thank him for first proving that graves were still intact at the African Burial Ground and for assembling the field team. Obviously, without the field records no analysis would have been possible. We thank Field Director Michael Parrington, Brian Ludwig, and the entire field staff, along with members of the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team, for their efforts in conducting and recording the excavations under difficult conditions. Special thanks go to Margo Schur and the other site artists who carefully drew each burial; and to Dennis Seckler for the photographs. Margo also assisted us by answering questions about field recording procedures. Initial laboratory processing of burial related artifacts was under the direction of Linda Stone and subsequently Gary McGowan of JMA. Charles Cheek was in charge of the analysis of the non-burial component of the 290 Broadway site, and we thank him for generously sharing early drafts of his site report and answering our questions as we proceeded with our analysis.

Numerous local libraries and archives yielded resources for our analysis. We thank the staffs of the following for helping us track down materials and answering our questions: the New York Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; the New-York Historical Society; the New York State Archives; the Brooklyn Public Library; the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society; the Municipal Archives of the City of New York; the Trinity Church Archives; and the John Street Methodist Church.

Help with specific questions and analyses was received from a number of individuals. Mac Headley of Colonial Williamsburg shared his knowledge of colonial cabinetry and coffin-making and pointed us to additional sources. Ed Howson answered questions about joinery. Emily Wilson of Colonial Williamsburg provided information on enameling. Douglas Ubelaker provided information and sources on the rates of decay of

human remains. Ann F. Budd, Department of Geology, University of Iowa, provided identifications of coral specimens from the African Burial Ground. John Boyd of the U.S. Customs Service Federal Crime Laboratory performed spectrograph analysis on the silver pendant. Michelle Gilbert guided us through the literature on adornment in Ghana. Fatimah Jackson, Kofi Agorsah, Muhammad Hatim, and Sylviane Diouf provided information about Islamic burial practices. Cheryl LaRoche answered questions about the conservation of artifacts from the burials. Jason Narvaez and Jennifer Arnett provided technical advice on report graphics.

Howard University provided technical staff for digitizing the site map. We thank Robert Bethea for overseeing the initial digitizing, and technicians Percival Taylor and Marques Roberts, who, along with Ruth Mathis and Iciar Lucena Narvaez, patiently refined, double-checked, and corrected the base mapping.

We thank Dean Susan Pease, Dean of the School of Arts and Science, and Michael Park, Chair of the Department of Anthropology, at Central Connecticut State University for providing release time for Warren Perry and for supporting his work on the project over many years. Janet Woodruff, of Central Connecticut State University's Archaeology Laboratory for African and African Diaspora Studies (ALAADS), has provided energy and advice as well as many hours of her own time. We thank Richard L. Porter of The RBA Group for understanding the importance of the project and making it possible for Jean Howson to contribute much of her time. Thanks also to RBA's Kathy Krumbine for help formatting front matter and appendices, and Ed Zeltmann, who prepared all of the site maps for the report.

This report has benefited greatly from the careful critiques of the members of the Advisory Review Board: Diana DiZerega Wall, Theresa Singleton, and Frank McManamon. We are grateful for their excellent suggestions. The interpretations offered herein, along with any errors or omissions, remain our own.

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Howard University gratefully acknowledges the efforts of the African Burial Ground Project directors, under the leadership of Dr. Michael L. Blakey, and the editors, authors, research team members, and research consultants for their contributions to the Archaeology Final Report. A tremendous debt of gratitude is owed to the three members of the Advisory Review Board, jointly appointed by the U.S. General Services Administration and Howard University, for the excellence and professionalism of the critiques they provided for the several iterations of this report.

Mr. David Austin, coordinator of duplicating services, College of Arts and Sciences, was responsible for copying and binding the report.